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Beyond persecution: Exploring alternative refugee narratives in Jenny Erpenbeck

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Abstract

In bureaucratic settings, complex refugee narratives are often converted into stereotypical accounts of persecution guided by questions asked by protection officers. This article explores potential room for improvement in these administrative dialogues on displacement through literary text analyses. I argue that literature does not only operate as a platform to contest laws and policies, but also as a powerful source of alternative modes of narration in the context of asylum and migration. This point is demonstrated in a first case study of the dialogues on refuge in the European Union embedded in Jenny Erpenbeck's acclaimed novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015).

<div align="right">'It's not easy.
Life is crazy.
Cut.'</div>

In order to be granted international protection, asylum seekers in the European Union (EU) have to convey a credible fear or risk in case of return to their country of origin. According to EU guidelines, the asylum interviews conducted by national protection officers should be marked by trust, respect and empathy (European Asylum Support Office [EASO], 2014, p. 6). Despite these principles, the refugee narratives expected in this bureaucratic setting have often been condemned by academics and practitioners as sterile accounts of persecution. This article explores potential room for improvement in dialogues on displacement by moving from the legal context to the literary text. Can literature contribute to the standards to be applied in asylum and migration hearings through Europe? Can its diverse forms of storytelling, in particular, enhance the narrative interactions currently performed in national administrations? These questions will be explored in a case study of the refugee narratives embedded in Jenny Erpenbeck's acclaimed novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015).

Refugee narratives
Administration
In legal terms, refugee narratives are those stories that lead to international protection— stories that conform to both a standard definition (the 'refugee') and a bureaucratic format (the 'narrative'). In this context, 'refugeedom' should be interpreted not as a mere human condition, but as a restricted legal category (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007), or even an exclusive label (Zetter, 2007; Agier & Madeira, 2017). According to the 1951 Geneva Convention and one of its main complementary instruments (McAdam, 2007), the European Union Qualification Directive, protection should in fact be granted solely to persons who have a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'[1], or who face a 'real risk of suffering serious harm'[2] in case of return to their country of origin. These persons are often deemed to be deserving of support, contrary to the ill-defined group of economic migrants (Yarris & Castañeda, 2015). Though considered to be inadequate by many (see for instance Koser & Martin, 2011), both these categories keep resurfacing in the political and media discourses of today (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017). Beyond the refugee label itself, the 'narrative' of the person seeking refuge—the central part of the refugee status determination (RSD) procedure—is also shaped by the institutional setting in which it is produced. This official story is of course but the umpteenth version of a story previously (re)told to other actors in the asylum process: social workers in the reception centre, psychologists, guardians, not to mention lawyers preparing their clients for the final interview. It is during the RSD procedure in particular, however, that the asylum seeker needs to persuade the interlocutor of their need of international protection through a clear account of individual persecution (Guild, 2014).

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[1] United Nations General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, Art. 1a.

[2] Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast), Art. 2.

In this bureaucratic context, rather than as an actual life story full of perspectives, deviations and lacunae, their autobiography should be presented as a 'case' (Zetter, 2014) or a 'report' (Maryns, 2014) of facts in an acceptable form (Baynham & De Fina, 2005). This narrative is further transformed by the interaction with the case officer, a listener and questioner not only subject to sociocultural expectations (Jubany, 2011), but also charged with the difficult task of assessing the protection needs of the applicant: is their story credible? Does it correspond with the available Country of Origin Information (COI)? Is the established fear or risk well-founded? Are there any protection alternatives in the applicant's home country (EASO, 2018)? As a result, the dialogue that is presumed to take place is marred by a profound narrative inequality (Blommaert, 2011), one that may lead to a loss of control over the asylum seeker's personal story (Zagor, 2014).

Literature

The refugee identities and stories expected by national RSD procedures have often been challenged by lawyers, anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists. Conversations on refuge that are produced outside the bureaucratic context, by contrast, remain relatively unexplored. Literature undoubtedly provides a vital medium to give voice to humans that are otherwise rendered 'speechless' (Malkki, 1996), yet its dialogues on displacement have rarely been studied by literary scholars. In fact, publications in this discipline have focused on conceptual interpretations (Farrier, 2011), cultural representations (Woolley, 2014), and first-person life narratives of asylum (see for instance Carton, 2018), rather than on narrative interactions between migrants and citizens.

This article offers a literary contribution to the long-standing narrative research in forced migration studies (Eastmond, 2007) through an analysis of the fictionalised migrant-citizen dialogue in a recent German novel. The aim is not to search for migration stories that are more 'true' or 'genuine' than those presented in administrative procedures. In fact, bureaucratic requirements may inform artistic expressions and representations of refugeedom to such point that the latter reproduce the 'right' stories and images of persecution and victimhood.[3] Rather, this paper intends to explore how contemporary literature can reveal alternative modes of narration in the context of asylum and migration.

Erpenbeck's novel

First published in German in August 2015, Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* [translation *Go, Went, Gone*] describes the gradual discovery of the life stories of asylum seekers in the city of Berlin by the fictional character Richard. The novel's various thresholds of interpretation—'paratexts' (Genette, 1987)—inform the reader that the story is inspired by the author's own conversations with migrants she met at Berlin's Oranienplatz in 2014. In interviews, Erpenbeck explains how she came in touch with these individuals (Bartels, 2015), while in the novel itself, she acknowledges being 'deeply grateful for [the] many good conversations' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 285) she had with thirteen men of African origin.[4]

The events and dialogues in *Go, Went, Gone* are largely described from the perspective of Richard, a recently retired professor in Classics born in East Germany. Throughout the novel, he is confronted with a flux of stereotypes, opinions, and concerns

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[3] For a study of this 'performance' on stage I refer to Jeffers, 2012.
[4] This reference to the author's personal experience can also be found in European fiction published in the wake of the latest refugee crisis, such as *Breach* by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes and *Jours d'exil* by Juliette Kahane.

voiced by friends, politicians, and users of internet forums, as much as with his own cultural and historical background. The life stories he hears evoke the trials of Odysseus, Tristan, and other characters of the literary canon, thoughts on the 'indirect effect' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 202) of European colonialism on African migration, and reflections on Germany's troubled twentieth century (Stone, 2017). His own memories of the Berlin Wall are frequently juxtaposed with the numerous borders encountered by his African conversation partners.[5]

At the core of the novel is the professor's 'research object': those 'refugees apparently' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 18) first seen on television during a protest at Alexanderplatz that from there on 'become visible' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 14, 19, 20) as individuals with an identity and origin (pp. 14, 26). Unsatisfied with the media coverage of the topic,[6] the scholar decides to search for the narratives behind the names and images himself.[7] Jenny Erpenbeck describes this research as a simultaneous movement from distance to proximity and from surface to essence. The central character crosses a virtual threshold to attend a first meeting with migrants,[8] reflects upon the distance to maintain,[9] and at last invites some asylum seekers at home (pp. 120, 129, 139, 172), despite the advice of the director to talk to them in their residence.[10] At the same time, Richard immerses himself in the life stories of these African migrants that survived the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean on their journey to Europe—these men that 'could just as easily be lying at the bottom of the [sea]' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 221) and are 'simultaneously alive and dead' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 167)—well aware of the fact that he only has access to those narratives that can still emerge from the surface.

Structure

The narrative structure chosen by experienced storyteller Erpenbeck[11] is that of a modern European frame tale—the story of Richard's retirement and research—that contains life narratives of migrant 'others'. The stories of migration that succeed and cross each other throughout the novel resemble the intricate lines of Saleh Bacha's cover image for the original publication in German (Erpenbeck, 2015), as much as Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* referred to in the text.[12] Just as in Bach's composition, in the novel 'there are no surfaces, just crisscrossing storylines' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 31): it is a literary 'polyphony' (Bakhtin, 1929/1984) containing multiple voices, stories, and variations.

The 'secondary' narratives of the migrants often catch Richard (and the reader) by surprise. Some of the asylum seekers are invited by the professor emeritus to tell their life

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[5] 'Have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn't just measured by an opponent's stature but in fact creates him?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 211).

[6] 'Could an image stand as proof? And should it? What stories lay behind all the random images constantly placed before us? Or was it no longer a matter of storytelling?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 19).

[7] 'You have to know a lot more than just the name, otherwise there's no point' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 31).

[8] 'What counts as outside, as inside?'; 'They cross the threshold, but what counts here as inside and outside?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 25, 225).

[9] 'It's possible that he's actually already addressing the men as intimates, thinking "du" in German in his head, but why would he? He wouldn't use "du" even with his students'; 'Here it is again, that "you" that sounds like a "du"' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 48, 50).

[10] '—One more thing, [the director adds,] the men are allowed to leave the building, but it's still probably best if you hold your conversations here. —That isn't a problem. —Just thought I'd mention it.'; 'How long had it been since the director … told Richard that it might be better to speak with the refugees in the home and not, say, at Richard's house? Just a suggestion, the director added. What exactly had he meant? A suggestion' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 45, 139).

[11] See for instance the five possible versions of a character's life in Erpenbeck's *The End of Days*.

[12] For a technical study of the composition I refer to Williams, 2011.

story, others instead chase him, run into him or appear out of the blue (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 55, 57, 83, 96–97, 108, 129, 241). Once started, their conversations are more than once interrupted by unforeseen circumstances—ranging from the sound of sirens to a narrator's sudden disappearance (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 105, 116, 172, 173, 174, 213, 242). At the 'primary' level, the chaotic, intense accounts are continuously incited and received by Richard, who as a mere recorder tries to erase himself from the migrants' narratives as an irrelevant element.[13] At times, he is forced to revisit some testimonies returning to him in the form of 'voices'[14] and 'ghosts'[15].

Throughout these diverse stories, three common episodes can be discerned. In fact, most of the African narrators in *Go, Went, Gone* faced persecution during their stay in Libya, entered the EU through Italy, and eventually applied for asylum in Germany. Each of these recurrent 'chapters' clearly condemn existing (inter)national laws and policies on asylum and migration.

Libya

The asylum seekers portrayed by Erpenbeck originate from various African countries, but all of them spent a period of time in Libya before moving on to Europe. Under Qaddafi, Libya indeed became a country of destination for numerous Sub-Saharan migrant workers (Morone, 2017). Only after the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, and because of a general lack of protection and targeted attacks on black Africans, many of these migrants left the country (Albahari, 2015, p. 154). In *Go, Went, Gone*, the name of 'Libya' is first mentioned in a casual remark about the presence of shrapnel in a person's lungs,[16] and then briefly summarised by one of the narrators: 'In any case, no one was on our side. Even though I grew up in Libya. Libya was my country' (p. 62). In fact, at the time of the Libyan conflict, no protection mechanisms existed for these non-citizens caught in a country in crisis.[17]

Though Erpenbeck does not refer to this particular protection gap, the Libyan episodes recounted in her novel do question the common conception of asylum and migration as linear movements from a place of origin via a 'transit country' such as Libya to a final destination (Düvell et al., 2014). Some of the narrators in *Go, Went, Gone* spent years or even decades in Tripoli severing all connections with their country of origin, but are still supposed to demonstrate 'a well-founded fear of being persecuted' in the latter state to the German administration. Informed about these bureaucratic expectations, Richard thus urges one of his conversation partners not 'to tell [his] story' as it is, but to emphasise instead that back in his country of nationality he used to be part of a persecuted minority.[18] Far from this official narrative, the testimonies in Erpenbeck foreground the complex decision-making processes involved in human movements in general (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Crawley et al.,

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[13] 'But his failure isn't what matters here. He's not what matters'; 'Will he too occupy some place in their stories? Maybe. Does it matter?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 100, 152).

[14] 'Now Richard is home again and can still hear the man's voice' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 108).

[15] 'The rooms he's gotten to know so far are all filled to the brim with ghosts' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 97).

[16] 'He's got shrapnel in his lung, by the way, she says, and the bearded man nods. Libya, she says, he nods, then both are silent for a moment' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 34).

[17] The Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative has been launched in 2014, and its *Guidelines to Protect Migrants in Countries Experiencing Conflict or Natural Disaster* have been published in June 2016. For a further discussion of this issue, see Koser, 2014.

[18] 'Richard tells Apollo: Listen. Apart from being in Libya, as a Tuareg back in your own country, Niger, you belonged to a persecuted minority – say that when you have the interview. When I have my interview, I will tell my story. Yes, Richard says, but also mention the rebellion. I will tell my story just as it was. If I have to go, I can go' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 170).

2018), and the vulnerable position of those migrants stranded abroad in particular (Collyer, 2010)—aspects that are not covered by the faulty logic of origin-transit-destination.

Italy

Displaced by the Libyan conflict, the African characters in *Go, Went, Gone* cross the Mediterranean, survive this perilous journey, reach the Italian coast, and travel to Germany to apply for asylum. As their stories unfold in Berlin, Richard nonetheless learns that their applications need to be examined by the country of entry Italy, as stipulated by the Dublin Regulation II.[19] This EU instrument, first introduced as the Dublin Convention in 1990 and most recently recast in 2013, has been subject to sharp criticism from legal scholars for a range of reasons. Some of these scholars remark that as a legal border, the regulation severely restricts the freedom of movement of non-EU nationals (Guild, 2006). Others argue that the 'secondary movements' of asylum seekers to other member states are in itself defensible, given the enormous differences in protection rates and general living standards across the EU (O'Nions, 2014; Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Gill & Good, 2019).

In *Go, Went, Gone*, Dublin is described as a mechanism of 'invisible fronts' trapping the foreigner 'in an intra-European discussion that has nothing at all to do with him or the actual war he is trying to escape from' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 68). Due to this much disputed legal instrument, numerous accounts of displacement, moreover, remain unheard for sustained periods of time, silenced as it were by the EU bureaucracy. Though one of the applicants encountered by Richard even gathered 'proof' about the massacre in his home town—material evidence being another requirement in applications for asylum—he will never have the opportunity to present his case to the German authorities.[20] Richard thus decides to take up the task ignored by the German state: 'to listen to the stories of arriving refugees'[21].

Germany

In addition to these spatial concerns from Libya to Dublin, the migrants in Germany have to face another border inherent in the asylum procedure: time.[22] In the national processes regulated by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS)—an innovative, yet unfinished legal framework—asylum seekers indeed need to enter an often time-consuming, labyrinthine bureaucracy in order to receive a final decision (Bauloz et al., 2015). Once in Europe, the African men portrayed in *Go, Went, Gone* can exercise their right to seek asylum *de jure*, yet are *de facto* deterred by locals eager to 'defend their borders with articles of law' or to 'assail these newcomers with their secret weapon called time, poking out their eyes with days and weeks, crushing them with months' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 81).

During this procedure—often protracted, if not fraught with unforeseeable ruptures,

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[19] Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national.

[20] 'He shows Richard copies of newspapers articles: *Massacre*, Richard reads, flipping through them: *massacre*, *massacre*. That was in my hometown, Zani says, that's why I fled to Libya, it wasn't easy to get these articles, but I need to have proof for the interview. … Richard knows that the agreement Dublin II regulates only the responsibility of each signatory country, but he says nothing' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 171).

[21] 'Dublin II allows all the European countries without a Mediterranean coastline to purchase the right not to have to listen to the stories of arriving refugees' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 66–67).

[22] For a study of temporal and other borders as 'complex social institutions', I refer to Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013.

suspensions or accelerations—asylum seekers seem to exist in an 'absolute present' (Griffiths, 2014). Erpenbeck criticises this endlessness by presenting the migrant narrators as simultaneously 'condemned to idleness'[23] and paralysed by insecurity,[24] and by comparing their existence in limbo to 'a set of parentheses'[25], 'an empty present' and even 'a life without a shoreline'[26]. At one point, the protagonist of the novel is struck by the fact that these youngsters are 'forced to be so old here'[27]—forced to experience an excess of time identical to the one the professor emeritus is tormented by in the opening chapter (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 4). The retired researcher with hours and days in abundance and these foreign nationals either 'fallen out of' or 'locked up in'[28] time thus become the ideal conversation partners.[29]

Stories of refuge

The stories of refuge that are slowly unveiled in the temporal void of *Go, Went, Gone* do not merely criticise existing asylum and migration laws and policies, they also reveal the potential contributions and shortcomings of dialogic life narratives. Erpenbeck's novel offers multiple examples of faulty and even failed Q&A's that question both the sociocultural norms and narrative expectations underlying conversations on displacement.

Questions

As befits a serious scholar, Richard gathers information on the African 'refugees' stranded in Berlin through various methods—first by reading specialised articles, then by attending a public discussion and by observing the migrants at Oranienplatz,[30] and eventually by addressing them directly in their residence. Despite several 'obstacles', including a sudden transfer of his conversation partners to a location outside the city, he perseveres in conducting his 'serious research'[31] founded on listening. Rather than as a passive reception, the 'act of listening' the professor has in mind is introduced as an active performance analogous to the speech act first theorised by Austin (1962).[32] According to Richard, listening is a crucial, though inevitably biased exercise in understanding someone else's statements, evoking such questions as: 'What should you understand? What do you want to understand? What will you never understand but want to have confirmed?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 75).

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[23] 'The time during which a person doesn't know how his life can become a life fills a person condemned to idleness from his head to his toes' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 237).

[24] 'There are so many disruptions in their lives that there's no room in their heads for new vocabulary. They don't know what's going to happen to them. They're afraid. It's difficult to learn a language if you don't know what it's for' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 75).

[25] 'Suddenly this waiting seems to him like a set of parentheses bracketing off everything taking place on the ground' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 242).

[26] 'A life in which an empty present is occupied by a memory that one cannot endure, in which the future refuses to show itself, must be extremely taxing, Richard thinks, since this is a life without a shoreline, as it were' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 277).

[27] 'For a moment it horrifies him that these young men are suddenly being forced to be so old here: waiting and sleeping. Taking meals for as long as the money holds out, and besides that: waiting and sleeping' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 50).

[28] 'Speaking about the actual nature of time is something he can probably do best in conversation with those who have fallen out of it. Or been locked up in it, if you prefer' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 38).

[29] 'He has plenty of time for listening, he'll listen to everything. He has time' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 48).

[30] For a discussion of the Oranienplatz protest on which Erpenbeck's novel is based I refer to Stone, 2017, pp. 2–3.

[31] 'People wouldn't throw rulings around, he thinks, if they understood what it means do to serious research. He's only just started his interviews, and now obstacles are being strewn in his path' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 78.)

[32] Erpenbeck refers to the speech act model by Friedemann Schulz von Thun.

In his attempt to grasp the meaning of the life narratives by the African migrants, Richard frequently ponders the questions he should ask them. Though always delighted by 'the birth of questions' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 43), in some conversations he has to refrain from overusing them,[33] or conversely has to keep searching for those formulas that could lead to 'the land of beautiful answers'[34]. Experienced, yet eager to learn, throughout the migrants' stories the scholar discovers that 'everything depends on asking the right questions' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 235). Prior to his very first visit to the residence, he prepares a detailed catalogue of questions in order to convert the 'drafty'[35] lives of the men he is about to meet into a chronological account:

> Where did you grow up? What's your native language? What's your religious affiliation? How many people are in your family? What did the apartment or house you grew up in look like? How did your parents meet? Was there a TV? Where did you sleep? What did you eat? What was your favourite hiding place when you were a child? Did you go to school? What sort of clothing did you wear? Did you have pets? Did you learn a trade? Do you have a family of your own? When did you leave the country of your birth? Why? Are you still in contact with your family? What was your goal when you left home? How did you say your goodbyes? What did you take with you when you left? What did you think Europe would be like? What's different? How do you spend your days? What do you miss most? What do you wish for? If you had any children who were growing up here, what would you tell them about your homeland? Can you imagine growing old here? Where do you want to be buried? (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 39)

Covering an entire lifetime from the cradle to the grave, these questions nonetheless turn out to be useless once Richard's first interlocutors start recounting their lives *in medias res*—at their dramatic crossing of the Mediterranean Sea:

> The burly fellow, Rashid, and Zair, the one sitting next to him, were in the same boat. What vegetation is there in your country? Do people have pets? Did you learn a trade? When the Italian coast guard tried to take the refugees aboard, all of them rushed to one side of the boat, and that's why the boat capsized. … Did you go to school? Rashid couldn't swim. He grabbed onto a cable, and this is how he remained above water. Zair can't swim either, but as the boat began to tip upside down, he climbed over the edge of the boat sticking up in the air to its underside, and from there he was rescued. What kind of place did you like to hide when you were a child? But 550 out of 800 drowned. (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 47)

Disoriented and exhausted by these short testimonies, Richard abandons his questionnaire and asks about the African men's everyday lives in the residence instead.[36] The conversation introduces the protagonist and the reader to the complexities of narration about migration— a narrative process that may be continuous in theory, but is in practice often disrupted by past traumas and present interactions.

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[33] 'Richard would like to be able to ask and ask without stopping' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 88).

[34] 'Richard wishes he knew what questions would lead to the land of beautiful answers' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 99).

[35] 'To investigate how one makes the transition from a full, readily comprehensible existence to the life a refugee, which is open in all directions—drafty, as it were—he has to know what was at the beginning, what was in the middle, and what is now' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 39).

[36] 'What do you do here all day long, Richard asks … When an entire world you don't know crashes down on you, how do you start sorting it all out?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 48).

Perspectives

Despite this revealing introduction, the first extensive conversation in *Go, Went, Gone* is once again shaped by Richard's inadequate yardsticks. Both the chosen format of the Q&A and his sociocultural paradigms obstruct the life narrative of his first interlocutor, a young man resembling the Greek god Apollo. To incite this 'deity' to tell about his past, for instance, the scholar spontaneously asks 'What country are you from?', yet instead of receiving an expected answer about his 'country of origin', he only finds out that the migrant originates 'from the desert' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 50–51), being a member of the Tuareg. The subsequent questions about the Tuareg's family ties ('Father? Mother?', 'No parents?', 'Don't you have any family?') are even met by total silence. In this last case, Erpenbeck inserts several free indirect speech constructions to focus on the thoughts of the migrant:

> The boy is silent. Why should he tell a stranger that he doesn't know why he never had any parents? … Why should he tell him that he doesn't know if his parents are still alive? There was fighting going on at the time when he was born. Maybe his mother or his father was among the people buried alive beneath the sand by the Nigerien soldiers, or hacked to pieces, or burnt alive. Here and there, they told stories like this, perhaps he was stolen from his parents. In any case, he'd worked as a slave for as long as he could remember. Worked with the camels, donkeys, and goats from morning to night. Why should he show a stranger the scars left on his head and arms by beatings given him by his so-called family? (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 52)

In this paragraph, the 'non-disclosure' so often encountered in official asylum hearings (Bögner et al., 2010; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015) is undone by a sudden shift in perspective from the interviewer to the interviewee. This added 'focalization'[37] does not only expose the unusual reason for the nomad's silence—the ignorance of his own roots—but also reveals the potential shortcomings of dialogues across cultures. In *Go, Went, Gone*, the central character nevertheless endeavours to overcome these intercultural barriers by changing his own sedentary point of view when inquiring about life in the desert. At the end of the interview, Richard understands that for this interlocutor, Oranienplatz is but 'one station on a long journey, a temporary place, leading to the next temporary place' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 55).

Selections

After this first demanding interaction, Erpenbeck introduces the autonomous autobiography of the Ghanaian Awad, also known as 'Tristan'. He lost his mother at birth, grew up with his grandmother until the age of seven and then moved to Libya accompanied by his father. An enthusiastic narrator, the character is barely influenced by the questions asked by Richard. In fact, he ignores the scholar's approach to his current family situation ('And your father?', Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 58) as well as his intermediate questions 'And then?'. Repeated four times, these last phrases seem to serve as mere encouragement for the Ghanaian's account and its eventual traumatic ending in Libya: 'Then my father was shot' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 60–62). At one point, the independent narrator even reverses the assumed roles, questioning a speechless Richard: 'What's the sense of all this?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 63). Producing questions rather than answers, this free narrative provides an interesting alternative to the bureaucratic refugee accounts often steered by protection officers with leading questions

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[37] I refer to Genette, 1972, the pioneering study on focalization in literary texts.

(Herlihy & Turner, 2009).

Though the young, traumatised migrant offers a clear and chronological reconstruction of his life, he remains if not an unreliable, at least a fallible narrator (Booth, 1983; Zambelli, 2017). First, his story has undergone an inevitable selection process due to either personal preferences or incomplete memories (Cameron, 2010). Erpenbeck brings attention to this selectivity through the metaphor of a narrative surface that covers multiple untold stories, including those of the migrant's first years of life in Ghana with his 'Nana':

> This grandmother … tries to fight her way out of the memory-free zone surrounding her grandson, fight her way into the world of all that can be told, but she doesn't succeed, … she remains trapped in this lower stratum and silently sinks back down again. (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 59)

Second, the migrant narrator not only selects, but also reiterates certain aspects of his life narrative. His coherent story is repeatedly interrupted by chaotic and fragmentary thoughts ('It's not easy', 'I don't know where my mind is', Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 61, 62, 64, 269, 280) and obstructed in particular by one traumatic event: his escape from the house in Libya after the murder of his father. In the second conversation between Richard and Awad, this trauma is visualised by a change in focalisation rendering the German protagonist a total outsider in the Ghanaian's 'shattered' story of persecution:

> Awad opens the door, greets him. How are you, fine, and offers him a cup of tea, the thought of the shattered window he escaped through is lodged in his head, and so is the thought of blood, and the older gentleman sits down and says he has a few more questions, if it's possible, and the thought of his father is lodged in his head, he can't manage to extract all these thoughts from his head all on his own, all the shards are lodged in there while he puts the water on to boil, the thinking is lodged in his head like a shattered animal. (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 131–32)

The episode introduces a conversation model based on the narrative autonomy of a traumatised character unable to enter into dialogue with his partner. This near erasure of the interlocutor and questioner, however, also creates several gaps in the narrator's story of displacement. Remarkably, the lacunae pertain in particular to the 'relevant aspects' (EASO, 2014, p. 22) of his application for asylum: his fear in case of return to his country of origin.

Expectations

'Why don't you want to … return to Nigeria?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 86) is the future-oriented question on this fear in case of return asked by Richard in his first private conversation with Rashid, the 'Olympian' leader of the asylees. In this third case, the researcher gathers an all-embracing testimony which, however, defies potential narrative expectations.

First, this account diverges from the 'detailed and coherent narrative' required by asylum offices throughout the EU (EASO, 2014, p. 11; Maryns, 2014). The story told by Rashid opens with the earlier mentioned traumatic capsize in the Mediterranean, and only later turns to his original reasons for departure from Nigeria and Libya. Instead of a chronological sequence of persecution, escape and eventual salvation—a sequence that may recall the literary genre of the Bildungsroman (Vogl, 2017)—Rashid reveals a painful and confusing story of multiple losses. His non-linear narrative (*récit*) does not simply repeat the main events of his life (*histoire*) (Genette, 1972)—the sectarian violence in his hometown Kaduna, his stay in Libya and his journey to Europe—but instead remembers, revisits, and reverses this story from several angles.

As the character takes control of his account, he moreover dwells on sociocultural

circumstances as much as on relevant events. Asked to explain his reasons for non-return, for instance, he provides a long description of the end of Ramadan celebrations in his hometown before disclosing the religious persecution faced by his family. Although this contextualising 'home narrative' (Blommaert, 2011) can help visualise the setting in which persecutory acts have taken place, it is often eschewed in bureaucratic hearings as superfluous input that can also be found in so-called Country of Origin Information or COI. In *Go, Went, Gone*, the narrator's living conditions are presented as the 'normality' that is indispensable if one intends to understand the subsequent 'deviation' of persecution.

Second, Erpenbeck's description of Rashid's narrative also accentuates the limited perspective of a story told by a participating narrator. Even though some refugees may have inadequate knowledge of their past experiences (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007), administrations in the EU generally expect them to convey information about both the authors of and the reasons for past persecution (EASO, 2014, p. 16). This expectation of omniscience, which may call to mind the narrator of European realist novels (Vogl, 2017), also emerges in *Go, Went, Gone*, when Richard inquires into the murder of Rashid's father in Kaduna: 'Do they know who did it?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 88). As a victim of generalised sectarian violence, the narrator ignores his interlocutor's idea of a simple whodunnit and instead reverses their respective roles, becoming Richard's interrogator:

> It was very bad, he says after a while. Why do people kill other people?
> That's a much better question, Richard thinks. …
> I can't stand the sight of blood anymore.
> And only now does Richard understand that Rashid has spent the past two hours answering the question he asked him at the outset.
> Our life was cut off from us that night, as if with a knife. It was cut, Rashid says.
> Cut. (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 88–90)

Announcing the end of the first conversation session, the final term also visualises the unwillingness of the narrator to revisit his past through narration. 'Cut'[38] (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 193) resurfaces as a leitmotiv in the second session, in which Rashid recalls his forced journey from Libya to Italy. Having ignored Richard's impertinent question about the current situation of his two children who moved to Tripoli with him ('Are they still there?', Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 190), the narrator reveals that both of them drowned in the Mediterranean. The confession marks the end of a disturbing, disrupted narrative of migration that disregards ideals of linearity and omniscience.[39]

Fragments

Apart from the extended testimonies discussed above, *Go, Went, Gone* contains several fragments of other stories of displacement. About a man named Khalil, the protagonist solely learns from another narrator that he lost track of his parents when he was driven on a boat during the Libyan conflict.[40] About Osarobo, he only knows that he stayed in Libya with his father and entered Italy as an unaccompanied minor later on, but he discovers next to nothing

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[38] The phrase also resonates in one of Richard's final contemplations: 'Rashid said he wished he could cut off his memory. Cut it away. Cut' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 277).

[39] 'For a while, Rashid says nothing, and Richard doesn't feel compelled to ask any questions' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 193).

[40] 'Already the face of the young man who wanted to go dancing last night has been transformed into the face of a young man who's fled across the sea and doesn't know if his parents are still alive. Khalil was separated from them the day they were driven onto the boats, Rashid told Richard not long ago' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 166).

about his initial life in Niger. The interaction with this adolescent does not move beyond a distressing series of questions and short answers ('Do you think about your future sometimes? – Future? he says', p. 100) that is marked by the recurring motif 'Life is crazy' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 99, 100, 101, 160, 199).

Lastly, about the 'thin man' supposedly called Karon who wanders through the novel (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 108, 116, 131, 153–54, 201), the central character only step by step finds out that he left his home country Ghana in order to provide for his family, considered to be the duty of the oldest son ('It's the culture', Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 202–03). The leitmotiv contained in this sinuous life narrative through Ghana, Libya, and multiple states in Europe—'I looked in front of me and behind me and saw nothing' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 112, 113, 115)—calls attention to both the motivations and trials of many so-called 'economic migrants'. This final conversation in *Go, Went, Gone* is closed by a sequence of rhetorical questions asked by the asylum seeker:

> If I can't stay in Germany after the interview, Karon says, where can I go? Where can I find a job in Italy? How can I feed my mother and siblings? Where in the world is the place where I can lie down to sleep in peace? The problem is very big, Karon says. (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 202–03)

The stories of the other African characters (dis)appearing in the background—Abdusalam, Ithemba, Yussuf, Ali, Mohamed, Yaya, Moussa, Zani, Rufu and the mysterious 'Hermes'—remain untold. Yet these intersecting narratives, reflections, fragments, and questions on displacement all converge in one critical statement positioned on two blank pages at the end of the novel: 'Where can a person go when he doesn't know where to go?' (Erpenbeck, 2017, pp. 266–267).

Conclusions

Guided by the research and interrogation of the protagonist, the reader of *Go, Went, Gone* discovers that none of the portrayed asylum seekers will be recognised as a refugee in Germany. Some of them are ineligible as economic migrants or only faced persecution in a country of which they do not have the nationality, others disregarded the Dublin Regulation II or reached adulthood during their stay in Europe. Their testimonies, conversely, introduce upsetting stories of displacement that continuously call into question the sociocultural prejudices of the protagonist-reader. Through these dramatic life narratives, Jenny Erpenbeck presents asylum and migration as complicated, entangled problematics largely ignored in public debates.

Beyond the legal discussion about the required scope of international protection, Erpenbeck's novel also exposes the narrative challenges that may hamper contemporary refugee status determination processes. First, her reimagined life stories of displaced persons consistently include episodes about their previous emigrations and journeys and their current procedures. These 'chapters' merge into a complex, comprehensive narrative of multiple traumas and voids that bring into question the single account of persecution commonly requested in institutional contexts. Second, the conversations on these life stories underscore the potential communication failures in dialogues across cultures. The interactions in *Go, Went, Gone* uncomfortably elucidate how the expectations of the citizen-listener may clash with the perspective, selection, coherence, and silence of the migrant-narrator.

While not providing any straightforward alternative to the current asylum processes, the novel does reveal the difficulty of producing an (often traumatic) life story at a specific moment in time and to a specific interlocutor. Its dialogues show that this narrative—

spontaneous, fragmented, or irrelevant as it may be—should rather be recounted on multiple occasions, to multiple conversation partners. The official account, in this case, could then be (re)constructed throughout the asylum procedure by a number of professional actors, including psychologists, social workers, and guardians. The question is, of course, how such narrative model could ever be adopted without impacting upon the required credibility assessment and the overall efficiency of the procedure.

In recent legal scholarship, it has been argued that the present-day asylum procedure should adjust both the focus on the persecutory act(s) and the format of the monologic narrative (Zambelli, 2017). Erpenbeck's semi-fictional contribution reinforces this call for reform as it represents the merits, challenges, and pitfalls of dialogic life stories. Contemporary novels like hers invite literary scholars to examine and understand the peculiarities of conversations on (forced) migration as transformed or imagined in literature. Despite and beyond their partly fictional nature, these literary dialogues can help reveal the strengths and weaknesses of narrative interactions between case officers and asylum seekers, between citizens and displaced others.

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